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Security Council

Seventy-third year

Provisional

8384th meeting
Monday, 29 October 2018, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Llorentty Soliz/Mr. Inchauste Jordán	(Bolivia (Plurinational State of))
Members:	China	Mr. Wu Haitao
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Ipo
	Equatorial Guinea	Mr. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Ms. Guadey
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Tumysh
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Netherlands	Mr. Van Oosterom
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Poland	Ms. Wronecka
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Sweden	Mr. Orrenius Skau
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Mr. Cohen

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) (S/2018/947)

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The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Expression of sympathy in connection with the shooting in Pittsburgh, United States of America

The President: On behalf of the members of the Security Council, I should like to condemn the deadly shooting that occurred on Saturday at the Tree of Life congregation synagogue in Pittsburgh. This hateful act led to the deaths of 11 civilians, targeted at their place of worship. The members of the Security Council express their deepest condolences to the families and loved ones of those killed, and they offer their sympathy to the people and the Government of the United States.

I ask those present to now rise in a minute of silence in honour of the memory of the victims.

The members of the Security Council observed a minute of silence.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018) (S/2018/947)

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2018/947, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015), 2332 (2016), 2393 (2017) and 2401 (2018).

I now give the floor to Mr. Lowcock.

Mr. Lowcock: I concluded my briefing to the Security Council last month (see S/PV.8355) with a question: Would the agreement reached between the Russian Federation and Turkey on Idlib provide only a moment of respite, or would it represent the start of a more stable future for millions of civilians in that part of the country? We have seen a glimmer of hope in the weeks of relative quiet since the agreement was reached. It is extremely important for millions of people in Idlib that that remains the case. The stakes are very high because the alternative is humanitarian suffering on a scale that would overwhelm all ability to respond, devastating a population that is already weakened through years of conflict, displacement and deprivation.

The United Nations and its partner organizations continue to reach people in need throughout Syria. Over the first seven months of the year, in total across the country, an average of almost 5.5 million people were reached with life-saving assistance every month. In September, nearly 2.5 million people were reached with food aid from Damascus. That includes some people in areas that have recently come under the control of the Government, with assistance often delivered through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent.

However, in many areas that recently changed control, the United Nations has not had sustained access. We have discussed this with the Syrian authorities, who have made clear that areas under their control should now be reached in a comprehensive and regular manner from Damascus. They have also agreed to facilitate a greater number of missions and that we can more systematically deploy United Nations personnel with aid that is often delivered in partnership with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. We look forward to the rapid implementation of that approach. It will allow our teams on the ground to undertake essential independent assessments of the situation and see more of who is being helped and how. At the same time, we will continue to submit plans for Government agreement for crossline access into north-west Syria.

That leads me to a broader point I wanted to make about the approach we are taking to assessing and meeting humanitarian need across Syria. The United Nations mandate for humanitarian action, set by the Council in its series of resolutions and also by the General Assembly in resolution 46/182, adopted in 1991, requires us to consult the Government. We think that is very important. At the same time, our mandate

also emphasizes the principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality in humanitarian action, in particular to ensure that assistance is provided on the basis of need, and not driven or determined by any other considerations.

The humanitarian system, as the Council knows, is financed on a voluntary basis. The main questions I am asked by all those whose help I seek in financing humanitarian action everywhere around the world are always the same. How do you know what the needs are? And how do we know, if we give you money, that it will really get to the people who need it most? If people whose money we are seeking are not persuaded by the answers we provide to those questions, my experience is that they do not give us the money we ask for. Ensuring that we work on the basis of the humanitarian principles is therefore both a matter of complying with our mandates, as we want to and as we must do, but it is also a matter of practical necessity.

I have discussed those issues in detail with the Government on a number of occasions in recent weeks. The discussions have led to important agreements in extending the United Nations ability to assess needs as comprehensively as possible, fully in compliance with our mandate, as we prepare the humanitarian needs overview and the United Nations-coordinated response plan that we will be publishing for Syria for 2019. I hope to be able to report progress to the Council in carrying out expanded needs-assessment exercises in the next few months.

The United Nations cross-border operation from Turkey has continued to reach hundreds of thousands of people in need every month. It has been scaled up in recent weeks to ensure pre-positioning of assistance as a contingency measure in the event of a military escalation, as well as to provide winterization support. Nearly 1,000 trucks are delivering plastic sheeting, winter clothes and boots, heaters and stoves. Critical supplies also continue to be delivered into north-east Syria through the Al-Yaarubiyah border crossing from Iraq.

In the first nine months of 2018, over 750,000 people on average each month were reached with food aid through United Nations cross-border activities. Sustaining that is essential for those in need, in terms of both providing aid and supporting service delivery. It is for that reason that the extension of the provisions of resolutions 2165 (2014) and 2393 (2017) remains of the highest importance. The Secretary-General in his report (S/2018/947), and I now, call upon the Council to renew the resolution for another 12 months.

Cross-border operations continue to be very closely managed and monitored. We continue to take every step possible to ensure United Nations operations meet the highest standards. The way we do that was reviewed in detail earlier this year at the request of the Council, and we reported on it to the Council in June (S/PV.8296). We train implementing partners and local authorities on the implementation of international humanitarian law; we advocate for principled delivery of assistance with non-State armed opposition groups inside Syria; and we have developed a code of conduct, signed by most non-State armed groups operating in north-west Syria, committing to respect international humanitarian law. We also take all possible steps to ensure compliance with money-laundering and counter-terrorism legislation applicable to the United Nations.

Let me turn to other areas of concern in Syria. In Rukban, on the Syria-Jordan border, the United Nations — in cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent — had prepared to undertake a large delivery of assistance from Damascus for 50,000 people, a vaccination campaign for approximately 10,000 children and a rapid needs assessment. The convoy was planned for Saturday, 27 October, but reports of insecurity along the route forced us to postpone it. The population at Rukban has not received assistance since January this year and they are increasingly desperate. There are continuing reports of children dying due to poor sanitary conditions and a lack of health care. That dire humanitarian situation cannot be allowed to continue. The United Nations is ready and willing to proceed with the convoy immediately. Therefore, my message to all concerned is to please make the necessary arrangements to ensure the security of the humanitarian personnel and the accompanying convoy so it can proceed without delay.

Intense fighting continues to affect civilians along the east bank of the Euphrates river in southern parts of Deir ez-Zor governorate. There have been reports of dozens of civilian deaths and more injuries as Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by international coalition Forces, engage in hostilities in the final remaining enclade in Syria of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Approximately 7,000 people have been displaced from Hajin due to fighting in recent weeks. Up to 15,000 people remain trapped inside ISIL-

controlled areas. An attack by ISIL on one of the camps where displaced people were staying has reportedly resulted in the death and injury of civilians, as well as the abduction of more than 100 people. Some of them have since reportedly been killed.

While I remain concerned about the situation in Raqqa, I want to report that the United Nations has had increasing access to the area. A September assessment visit by the World Health Organization found that health needs in Raqqa remain great, with an acute shortage of all levels of health-care services in the city. Assistance also continues to be provided to Raqqa city and the north-east, with the United Nations and our partner organizations now reaching over 600,000 people each month. In summary, and in conclusion, there are five areas where we now seek the support of Member States and the Security Council.

First is in the continuing implementation of the agreement between the Russian Federation and Turkey and the prevention of a military onslaught on Idleb and the surrounding areas. The humanitarian impact of that would be, as we have repeatedly told the Council, absolutely devastating to the civilian population.

Secondly is the renewal for another year of resolution 2165 (2014), in particular to sustain cross-border aid essential to support and protect more than 3 million civilians in Idlib — most of whom are women and children — and for essential supplies and services across the north of Syria.

Thirdly, we seek support in ensuring that our United Nations-Syrian Arab Red Crescent humanitarian convoy is granted secure access to Rukban camp immediately.

Fourthly, we seek support for our efforts to improve access, needs-assessment and evidence-gathering on how the resources we have raised are being used.

Finally, we need continued and more generous financing for our current humanitarian response plan. While I am — on behalf of millions of Syrians who are the beneficiaries — extremely grateful for the $1.7 billion we have raised so far in 2018, this year's plan is still less than 50 per cent funded.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Lowcock for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

Mr. Alotaibi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): Before I begin, I wish to express our condolences to the families of the victims of the plane crash in Indonesia, which claimed the lives of 189 civilians.

(*spoke in English*)

At the outset, I would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock for his valuable briefing, which confirms the continuing dire humanitarian situation in Syria. We support his five asks and call upon all Security Council members to work vigorously to that end. I would like to pay tribute to all medical and humanitarian workers for their efforts in the field to alleviate the suffering in Syria.

I will present this statement on behalf of the co-penholders of the Syrian humanitarian file, namely, Sweden and Kuwait. I will focus on two points: the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure and humanitarian access.

First, we reaffirm that all parties must respect and ensure respect for international humanitarian law in all circumstances, including by protecting civilians and civilian infrastructure. We also call on all parties to respect international human rights law. The period covered by the Secretary-General's report (S/2018/947) witnessed killings, arbitrary arrests and detentions, the deprivation of liberty, abduction, torture and inhumane, cruel and degrading treatment. We condemn in the strongest terms those practices against civilians by any party.

Secondly, we welcome the Russian-Turkish agreement on the ceasefire in Idlib — whose population is around 3 million, including 1 million children — which averted the immediate threat of a humanitarian catastrophe there. We applaud the pre-positioning measures taken by the United Nations and its humanitarian partners of humanitarian assistance and food to places in Idlib in preparation for the worst possible situation. In that regard, we stress the importance of the sustainability of the ceasefire in Idlib, and throughout Syria, to enable access to humanitarian assistance and the evacuation of injured persons, in accordance with international law and as stipulated in resolution 2401 (2018).

Thirdly, we are also concerned with developments in other parts of Syria. In Deir ez-Zor there are thousands of civilians affected by military operations. In that context, we call upon all parties to

strengthen the protection of civilians during military operations against the terrorist group Da'esh. We express our concern about the continuing danger of explosives — including mines and improvised explosive devices — in Raqqa, especially for the 152,000 people who have returned there.

Fourthly, unfortunately, the reporting period witnessed a continuation of one of the most egregious violations of international law, namely, the continued targeting of hospitals and health facilities. We condemn attacks against hospitals, as well as attacks targeting critical civilian facilities, and remind all parties of resolution 2286 (2016) and the specific obligations under international humanitarian law to respect and protect medical and humanitarian personnel exclusively engaged in medical duties, as well as their means of transport and equipment, and hospitals and other medical facilities.

The report also refers to a number of cases where schools have been targeted, resulting in the suspension of school activity. We remind the parties of their obligations under international law, the need to comply with resolution 2427 (2015), on children and armed conflict, and not to target schools.

There are still significant challenges for the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Syria, as stated in the Secretary-General's report. Although 1.5 million people remain in hard-to-reach areas, inter-agency convoys have not been approved since 16 August. We call upon the Syrian authorities to cooperate with the United Nations to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches those most in need — especially in the areas that have come back under Government control — through the various humanitarian modalities. Only about 30 per cent of the population with acute needs in those hard-to-reach areas are today assisted by needs-based, principled and sustained humanitarian assistance. A major reason for that is non-approval by Syrian authorities of requests for permission for access. We emphasize the need for humanitarian assistance to reach those in need in accordance with humanitarian principles, including the principles of impartiality and non-discrimination. In that context, we welcome the reference in the recent joint statement agreed by Turkey, Russia, France and Germany, which underscored the need to ensure the rapid, safe and unhindered access of humanitarian organizations throughout Syria and immediate humanitarian assistance to reach all people in need in order to alleviate the suffering of the Syrian people.

In that connection, we must recall what the Secretary General stated in his report — that cross-border humanitarian assistance provides an indispensable lifeline for hundreds of thousands of people across Syria. Cross-border aid is a vital and important part of the humanitarian response in Syria, as evidenced by its reach of 620,000 people in September.

We would also like to express our deep concern about the horrible situation in Rukban, where more than 45,000 people are suffering acute shortages of food and humanitarian and medical supplies. Let us heed the calls from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the United Nations system. We call on all parties to facilitate immediate delivery to Rukban. Anything short of delivery is unacceptable.

As co-penholders of the Syria humanitarian file and some of the largest donors to the Syrian humanitarian response plan, Sweden and Kuwait will ensure that the Council closely follows the humanitarian developments in Syria. Thirteen million Syrians still need humanitarian assistance; more than 5 million of them are children. Regrettably, it pains us to know that the humanitarian catastrophe will continue in the near and medium term. The humanitarian situation and suffering will be alleviated only by achieving progress on the political track through a political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex).

Mr. Cohen (United States): I thank Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his sobering briefing.

The timing of this meeting is especially important. On Friday, we heard the Syrian representative issue a chilling warning, in crystal clear terms, that the regime will "fully recover Idlib when we deem it necessary." (*S/PV.8383, p. 15*). Later that day, we saw reports of regime strikes on areas inside the Idlib zone.

What that means is that the window of opportunity to prevent the slaughter of millions of Syrian civilians living in Idlib, created by Turkey and Russia's agreement on a demilitarized zone, is closing. And it can close fast. Once that window closes, as Under-Secretary-General Lowcock reminded us this morning, a catastrophic humanitarian crisis will be on our hands. Civilians will die. Thousands will be displaced. We have seen this over and over again in this year alone

with the Russian and the regime's offensives in eastern Ghouta, Yarmouk and Dara'a, and now Idlib.

While we were encouraged by the United Nations assessment that Turkey and Russia's creation of a demilitarized zone in Idlib contributed to a reduction of violence in the past month, we are gravely concerned about the scale of the humanitarian crisis we would face if and when Al-Assad decides that the Idlib ceasefire has outlived its usefulness to him. That would likely be the largest catastrophe yet in this already devastating conflict. Syria and Russia have shown that they feel absolutely no obligation to uphold de-escalation zones in eastern Ghouta, Dara'a or even Idlib, based on recent developments. We cannot trust them to uphold the military agreement or basic humanitarian principles in Syria.

The best way to ensure that the Council can prevent another humanitarian tragedy from unfolding in Idlib and the countryside in Syria is to show genuine and urgent movement towards a political solution to the crisis, fully consistent with resolution 2254 (2015). The United States and the other members of the small group — Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom — are exerting every ounce of diplomatic effort to see the constitutional committee launch as quickly as possible, while one other Council member seeks to invoke what is has called "artificial deadlines" to prolong the dangerous status quo. But I think we all agree that, to support the political effort, the Organization's work to prepare for the worst in Idlib remains absolutely essential. The United States applauds the heroic efforts of the United Nations and its partners for their brave work to preposition humanitarian aid in Idlib and to ensure that the international community is prepared to respond should the regime break the ceasefire and trigger a humanitarian catastrophe.

The United States urges Russia and Turkey to make this ceasefire agreement durable, and for Russia to prevent the Syrian regime from launching any military offensive into Idlib. Provocations and disinformation by Damascus must stop, including the regime's and one Council member's continued attempts to falsely accuse the brave humanitarian first responders — the White Helmets — of planning chemical-weapons attacks in Idlib province. That is especially ridiculous given that independent mechanisms created in the Security Council have found the Syrian regime to be the party guilty of chemical-weapons use in Syria.

Returning to the issue of humanitarian access, it is no surprise that sustained humanitarian access from Damascus remains elusive in far too many parts of Syria. For the 3 million people living in Idlib alone, cross-border humanitarian assistance is a vital lifeline. United Nations cross-border deliveries are authorized by resolutions 2165 (2014) and 2393 (2017), and must be enabled by the parties to the conflict. To that end, the United States strongly supports the Secretary-General's assessment noted in the September report (S/2018/845) that the renewal of the cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism of the United Nations, as set forward by resolution 2165 (2014) and subsequent resolutions, is vital for some 5 million Syrians who currently depend on those cross-border humanitarian deliveries.

In other areas like Rukban, the Syrian Government has kept civilians under siege by denying humanitarian aid to the camp. While we look forward to the arrival of a joint United Nations-Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy reaching Rukban, we need to be clear that this is only a first step in addressing the dire humanitarian conditions people in Rukban face every day.

The United States has offered the United Nations all the necessary security assurances to allow that delivery to proceed. But a one-time delivery is not good enough. A one-time delivery does not allow for safe, rapid, unhindered and sustained access. Moscow and Damascus must ensure that the United Nations has regular and unimpeded access to provide humanitarian assistance to Rukban and all areas in need throughout Syria.

As the Secretary-General's report also notes, yet another month has gone by with no uptick in humanitarian access, even to territories that are now under regime control. Despite shifting battle lines and territorial control, there has been no improvement in the ability of relief organizations to reach those in need.

That is why the United States fully supports the United Nations assessment that conditions in Syria are not yet conducive to large-scale refugee returns. The Al-Assad regime continues to do little to demonstrate its willingness to create security and humanitarian conditions on the ground that would allow people to feel safe voluntarily returning to their homes. Reported conditions of continued insecurity and regime reprisals, arbitrary arrests and disappearances, such as in the south-west of Syria, demonstrate that the international

standards for refugee returns — and indeed, the removal of the cause of well-founded fears of persecution that led refugees to flee in the first place — have not yet been met.

Without the verifiable repeal of Law 10 and other similar laws, Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) face credible fears over their ability to return to their homes and rebuild their lives in safety and dignity, without prejudice to the demographic makeup of Syria. Syrian refugees and IDPs must be allowed to make their own decisions about returns that are safe, free and informed, and not premature or under pressure.

The United States is the leading donor of humanitarian assistance for the Syrian response, providing more than $9 billion in aid throughout Syria and to neighbouring countries, which have hosted more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees since the start of the crisis. The United States is proud of its long-standing and significant support for the people of Syria. However, the responsibility for the safety, dignity and well-being of Syrians belongs first and foremost to the Syrian authorities, not to Syria's neighbours, the international community or donors. We therefore call on the Syrian regime to uphold its most basic obligations to the Syrian people under international law, as well as their obligations to the Council, including by allowing for sustained humanitarian access to territories under their control. The regime's excuses have never been acceptable, but absent of the most basic signs of progress, those excuses are increasingly implausible.

Finally, I want to reiterate that we must move forward with the formation of the constitutional committee as quickly as possible as a first step towards an irreversible political transition, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015). This is not an artificial deadline. The years of suffering of millions of refugees and IDPs argue strongly that the parties and the United Nations must seize the closing window of opportunity provided by the Idlib ceasefire and act now. We are talking about saving people's lives. A timeline that does so as quickly as possible is not an artificial deadline; it is a moral necessity and precisely why we have the Council and the United Nations and why it is essential to act now. The constitutional committee represents an important opportunity to improve humanitarian conditions throughout Syria by securing an end to the conflict. We have no time to lose. We must not tolerate the imposition of more artificial delays. We must see that committee launched. Shame on us all if we do not now expend every effort to prevent another humanitarian tragedy in Syria.

Mr. Delattre (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to begin by thanking the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, for his ever-helpful and informative briefing, and by commending his tireless efforts, as well as those of his team, in responding to the extreme humanitarian emergency in Syria.

In the aftermath of the quadripartite summit that President Erdoğan convened in Istanbul on Saturday with President Macron, President Putin and Chancellor Merkel, I would like to reiterate that the humanitarian situation will be lastingly improved only with a long-term ceasefire and a credible political solution. That was the challenge at the Istanbul summit, which we thank the Turkish authorities for convening, and it marked an important step in that direction. In their joint statement, the four leaders demanded the full and lasting implementation of the ceasefire in Idlib, asked that the constitutional committee meet by the end of the year and called for free elections to be held under the supervision of the United Nations with the participation of all Syrians, including members of the diaspora. It is the implementation of that road map that will bring peace and stability to Syria and put an end to the suffering of the Syrian people, which has gone on for too long.

At the summit, the Presidents of France, Turkey and Russia and the German Chancellor recalled the imperative that all humanitarian organizations have quick, safe and unhindered access to all of the populations that need assistance in Syria. That is not the case today, as Mr. Lowcock pointed out, due to the Syrian regime's determination to manipulate and politicize humanitarian aid. In concrete terms, in order to relieve the suffering of Syrians and overcome this challenge, we must remain mobilized around three essential and complementary priorities: the protection of civilians, the guarantee of humanitarian access, which I just mentioned, and a lasting political solution in Syria.

The first priority is the protection of civilians and humanitarian and medical personnel. As Mr. Lowcock pointed out, the Russian-Turkish agreement on Idlib temporarily averted a bloodbath with an offensive that

would have had disastrous humanitarian, migratory and security consequences throughout the region. The quadripartite summit on Saturday reaffirmed the importance of that ceasefire not being a temporary freeze in the situation, but rather a long-term solution that allows us to stabilize the situation in Idlib. In that context, the protection of civilians must be a top priority for all stakeholders. All parties must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. We must also do everything to protect humanitarian and medical facilities and personnel. It must be hammered home that the attacks on hospitals and health workers are war crimes and that the perpetrators will be held accountable.

With regard to refugees, the conditions for their safe, dignified and voluntary return are not yet being met. The quadripartite summit identified those conditions, of which there are three aspects, namely, the need to be protected from armed conflict, arbitrary arrests and political persecution, respect for the right of ownership and access to basic services. We are far from attaining that, and it is clearly down to the Syrian regime. Despite announcing the repeal of Law 10, on forced expropriations, the regime does not seem ready to abandon its strategy of demographic engineering. We must continue to strongly oppose that strategy, which has serious and irreversible consequences and is one of the main obstacles to the return of refugees and displaced persons. Let us not be fooled by the regime's tale: it is not the absence of reconstruction that is preventing the return of refugees. It is the lack of credible progress in the political process, which is an indispensable process in creating the conditions for their return to be made possible within the framework guaranteed by international law.

The second priority is the guarantee of safe, complete and unhindered humanitarian access throughout Syria. The Syrian regime incessantly continues its strategy of the political instrumentalization of humanitarian aid — which constitutes the height of cynicism — by imposing unacceptable obstacles to the delivery of aid and disregarding the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law. Access to aid is essential for all parties, especially in hard-to-reach areas. It is unacceptable that the regime has been blocking inter-agency convoys for over two months now and is putting in place a punitive strategy by impeding the delivery of aid to the reconciled areas. In addition to convoys, humanitarian actors must be able to access the most vulnerable populations throughout the territory, based on the needs of those populations and not the authorizations that are arbitrarily handed out by the regime.

It is imperative that the entire population in need benefits from humanitarian aid. We call on actors with influence over the regime to ensure that all convoys can travel safely and unhindered throughout the country, in accordance with the relevant Security Council resolutions and international humanitarian law. I wound mention in particular the extremely worrisome situation in the Rukban camp, where 50,000 people are living in nightmarish conditions with no humanitarian convoy having been able to access it since January. I refer as well to the people displaced from Afrin who have taken refuge in the Tal Rifaat area, where they have been living in deplorable conditions for months. I am recalling these facts at a time when those people are preparing to face the rigours of a sixth winter of war.

I would also like to recall the indispensable and irreplaceable nature of cross-border humanitarian aid, which provides vital support to hundreds of thousands of people every day. More than 900,000 people were able to benefit from such help last month. The Council will soon be looking into the renewal of resolution 2165 (2014), and we call on members to demonstrate unity and shoulder their responsibility so that that important gain is preserved. We must be able to access populations in need by the fastest and most effective means possible. I emphasize in particular the magnitude and the urgency of the needs of populations in the north-east who have been liberated from Da'esh, where the coalition is working to stabilize the area. The situation calls for the United Nations to significantly and rapidly step up its work in that area, including through the cross-border delivery of aid. I formally call on the Organization to do just that.

The third priority concerns the launching of a sustainable political process, which is essential to eliminating definitively the risk of any new horrific escalation. As the Istanbul summit underscored, the ceasefire in Idlib, which has enabled avoiding a humanitarian disaster, also provides us with a window of opportunity to launch a credible political process in line with resolution 2254 (2015), which serves as our common guiding light more than ever. The goal is to create the conditions necessary for a virtuous cycle with the improvement of the humanitarian situation and the launching of a true political process, both

of which are inextricably linked. In that regard, the calls of the international community are clear. On Friday (see S/PV.8383), Council members together with Mr. De Mistura called for the establishment of a constitutional committee, for which the United Nations has a mandate, as soon as possible, and, on Saturday, the Istanbul summit communiqué called for the committee, an initiative of two of its participants, to be put in place by the end of the year. The formation of a constitutional committee is a necessary first step on the path of a credible political process that must be followed by the holding of free and fair elections under the supervision of the United Nations, with the participation of Syrian refugees and displaced persons in a safe and neutral environment.

Although the stabilization of areas liberated from Da'esh by the coalition is a priority, help to rebuild Syria is not on the agenda. There should be no ambiguity concerning the fact that assistance with reconstruction will be foreseeable only when an irreversible, credible and inclusive political transition has begun. To proceed otherwise would be to reward the intransigence of the regime and to rebuild on sand.

Rest assured that France will continue to spare no effort to improve the humanitarian situation in Syria and open the way to a political solution to the conflict.

Mr. Ndong Mba (Equatorial Guinea) (*spoke in Spanish*): Our delegation is grateful for the convening of this meeting and to Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his enlightening briefing.

After eight years of strife and a death toll of several hundred thousands, no one can deny that the Syrian people are exhausted by war, violence, permanent — and sometimes forced — displacement and the uncertainty of their future. When the Russian Federation and Turkey signed the agreement establishing Idlib as a demilitarized zone on 17 September, we, the members of Security Council, lauded it because we believed that that commitment, as well as the environment conducive to peace that it would create, would allow for restarting peace negotiations aimed at achieving a lasting solution to the conflict. However, the demilitarization of Idlib governorate should first of all improve the precarious humanitarian situation of the almost 3 million civilians living there and its surrounding areas. Despite the sharp decline in military offensives, the presence of radical terrorist groups jeopardizes attempts to stabilize that part of Syria. In that regard, it is important to remind the parties that any further escalation in the conflict would entail consequences inevitably causing harm to civilians. We call on the parties to commit to the demilitarization of the area and to implement it in line with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

The situation in the Al-Rukban camp, on the Syrian-Jordanian border, continues to be extremely worrying despite the fact that the Security Council has repeatedly called for it to be improved. As the report of the Secretary-General (S/2018/947) underlines, that camp hosts approximately 45,000 Syrians in terrible conditions. In order to remedy that situation and provide vulnerable people with protection and assistance, there is no option other than to guarantee access to humanitarian convoys in that area by the national parties to the conflict. In addition, the necessary conditions must be created to allow for the voluntary return of the mass of internally displaced persons to those cities and localities that have been liberated from the Islamic State. Moreover, we agree with the Secretary-General that in difficult-to-access areas, such as Deir ez-Zor governorate, which is currently the target of military attacks directed against the Islamic State, in Aleppo and Idlib, the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism for the Syrian Arab Republic should spare no effort to ensure cross-border assistance without restrictions pursuant to resolutions 2165 (2014) and 2393 (2017), thereby allowing cross-border assistance to reach those in need by the most direct routes so those who are vulnerable continue to enjoy access to the vital assistance they require.

With regard to Deir ez-Zor governorate, the Republic of Equatorial Guinea believes that it is necessary to avoid an increase in violence at all costs. Where hostilities are already occurring, we must ensure that the parties do everything possible to avoid the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and that combating terrorist groups is conducted in accordance with obligations under international humanitarian law. Moreover, it is essential to ensure that civilians who want to flee to other areas can enjoy the freedom of movement. No one, however, must be forcibly displaced from their homes, and those who stay must never become military targets.

The conflict in Syria cannot be resolved by military means. We can achieve a robust, long-term armistice only through a political process in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I thank Mark Lowcock once again for a clear and stark briefing, as well as his entire team on the ground.

I would like to start by joining the representative of Kuwait in expressing our deepest condolences to the Government and the people of Indonesia for the plane crash.

I also want to say that I thought the joint statement delivered on behalf of Kuwait and Sweden earlier was very powerful.

I should like to begin not immediately with the humanitarian situation, but with the Istanbul summit commitments as outlined by the French representative, and I thank him very much for his briefing. I completely agree with what the French Ambassador said about the political process. The small group on Syria is meeting now in London. As we all noted last week (see S/PV.8373), we hope that that combination of commitments and meetings will see some real, concrete progress on both political and humanitarian tracks, but I think that, concerning the political side and Idlib, I would very much like to receive confirmation today that the Idlib agreement between Russia and Turkey will hold and that those 3 million civilians will be kept safe. I would like to receive confirmation today that the constitutional committee will indeed be set up by the end of the year. And I would like to know if that is something that both Syria and Russia agree should happen. I also agree with what my United States colleague about chemical weapons.

Turning to the humanitarian side, which is the main purpose of the meeting today, I want to underscore what the Under-Secretary-General said about humanitarian principles and the aid needing to go to people in the most need. It is very worrying that we do not have full independent needs assessments. Proper refugee return really cannot happen without that. I would be grateful to know from the Syrian representative – but also from the Russians – what has been done to address the United Nations concerns on the independent needs assessment on Rukban. I take the point that there may be a security risk. I think it would be very good if the Council could have more detail on what that security risk is and how it might be overcome. I want to recall that United Nations States Members are obliged to ensure safe and sustained humanitarian access. As such, the Council needs to hear that assurance today. It also needs to hear that something will be done about security and that the United Nations convoys will be able to get through to those desperate people. I think we keep ducking at that issue in the Council. We keep raising the issue and have not yet received a satisfactory answer. It would be very good to get clarity on that today.

I also wanted to note that, with regard to humanitarian access and refugee return, we need to include the issue of security, freedom from political persecution and from arbitrary arrest if communities are to feel safe and secure about returning to their homes.

Finally, I want to endorse the five asks that the Under-Secretary-General set out today. I want to echo the call for unity on renewing resolution 2165 (2014). I think that would be a very powerful signal of progress on the ground. I want to speak again about the importance of movement forward on the political process.

Mark mentioned the need for more generosity from donors in terms of funding some of the United Nations plan. I would like to say that, in response to the crisis, the British Government has committed $3.47 billion to Syria since 2012, and that includes $1.25 billion actually spent inside Syria itself. Notwithstanding that, I would like to echo what the French Ambassador said about reconstruction. There is a difference between humanitarian assistance and reconstruction money. Reconstruction money will be available from Western Governments only in the context of a credible, sustainable political process that redresses and addresses some of the underlying concerns in Syrian politics today.

Ms. Wronecka (Poland): I would also like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for his comprehensive briefing. We support his five recommendations.

We have to acknowledge that the conflict in Syria has resulted in violence and violations of international law, including human rights law, and has brought suffering to the civilian population of Syria on a scale that is unique in today's world. Despite reaching unanimity in previously adopted resolutions — for example, resolution 2401 (2018) — we are still lacking substantial change on the ground. We understand that any solution is not entirely in our hands, but still we should try to do our utmost to find a possible way to provide life-saving aid.

The agreement between Russia and Turkey to establish a demilitarized area in the Idlib de-escalation zone allowed us to avoid risk of a humanitarian catastrophe. However, civilians across Idlib and surrounding areas have continued to face a range of protection threats, and massive humanitarian needs have persisted. The situation of the 3 million people in Idlib is a cause for very serious concern. We consider the agreement between Russia and Turkey a right move towards avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe. However, at the same time, we urge all parties to the conflict to ensure the full implementation of the agreement.

We reiterate our call to all parties to the conflict to implement the ceasefire to ensure unhindered and safe humanitarian access for all humanitarian actors to the whole territory of Syria, including cross-border delivery of humanitarian assistance, in particular in the Rukban area, as well as areas that have recently changed control. In that context, Poland would again like to strongly emphasize the need for full compliance by all the parties with their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law.

We also underline the obligation of all parties to the conflict to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. The protection of civilians in armed conflicts should be at the centre of our debate. We must put in place practical measures to effectively prevent or minimize civilian casualties and incidental damage to civilian objects.

Humanitarian assistance is by definition dependent upon those who provide it, that is, humanitarian and medical personnel. We must not forget that their safety and security need to be prioritized. They must be protected while performing their tasks.

We would like to reiterate our strong call to all the parties with influence over the situation on the ground, especially the Astana guarantors, to take all the necessary actions to achieve a full cessation of hostilities throughout the Syrian territory.

The scale of the Syrian crisis and humanitarian needs remain enormous. In that regard, we are deeply troubled by the severe situation of the most vulnerable victims of this conflict — especially children, women, members of religious minorities and internally displaced persons. Those groups currently constitute half of the current population of Idlib. If they are not protected, we risk a humanitarian catastrophe that might also include a serious threat of sexual violence.

Let me conclude by underlining that there can be no military solution to the Syrian conflict. A political agreement remains the only way towards peace. In that regard, I would like to emphasize the importance of the establishment of the constitutional committee. That requires a genuine political transition in line with resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué, (S/2012/522, annex), negotiated by the Syrian parties within the United Nations-led Geneva process.

Mr. Tumysh (Kazakhstan): At the outset, I would like to say that we, as a country with a strong stance on achieving a world free of terrorism and on promoting dialogue among civilizations and religions, are deeply shocked by the tragic shooting in a sacred place of worship, the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, and on the holy day of the Sabbath. We offer heartfelt condolences to the families of the 11 victims and wish the injured a speedy recovery. Our hearts and solidarity are with the Jewish community of the United States and worldwide. My delegation strongly condemns such acts of anti-Semitism, hatred and bigotry, which should have no place in the twenty-first century, and therefore calls for greater action to ensure peace, harmony and mutual respect.

We also offer our condolences to the Government and the people of Indonesia for the tragedy that cost the lives of 189 passengers aboard Lion Air. We grieve their loss with our deepest sympathies and solidarity.

We thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his comprehensive and informative briefing. Kazakhstan welcomes the positive changes in Idlib following the creation of a demilitarized buffer zone, in particular, with the restoration of transport and communications. We believe that the Sochi agreement should be promptly implemented in full compliance with the norms and principles of international humanitarian law. This agreement will consolidate the progress achieved and provide an opportunity to begin political negotiations. At the same time, we condemn the provocative actions of terrorist organizations, including in Aleppo, that do not recognize the agreement. The international community should not allow terrorist groups to undermine these agreements.

Kazakhstan expresses its concern over the safety and protection of civilians in Syria's rural Deir ez-Zor governorate, where fighting has displaced more than 30,000 people since July. We have been informed that the internally displaced persons have settled in

makeshift camps in the governorate and are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. We commend the United Nations for its efforts aimed at ensuring that there is sufficient food and nutrition and water, as well as sanitation and hygiene assistance, to satisfy the needs of the internally displaced people in the area.

Over the past month, many scores of civilians have reportedly been killed and injured, while up to 10,000 civilians remain trapped inside the Hajin area. Kazakhstan continues to urge all parties to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and to take constant care to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, including humanitarian personnel and assets.

We also express our concern over a large number of explosive devices left by Da'esh militants, and call for support of the United Nations initiative to undertake mine clearance in these territories. This will allow to eliminate unexploded ordnance, launch humanitarian operations and give refugees the opportunity to return to their homes. The international community should strengthen its efforts aimed at restoring Raqqa's infrastructure and at clearing the mines in its neighbourhoods since such efforts will allow hundreds of thousands of displaced people to come home. International humanitarian organizations should work more actively with local community structures to ensure that the refugees returns are voluntary and carried out safely and with dignity.

Kazakhstan calls upon the international community to support all parties to the inter-Syrian negotiation process aimed at achieving a peaceful solution to the crisis, and to use the previously mentioned positive progress to improve the humanitarian situation. Moreover, all interested parties should cooperate with the United Nations and its specialized agencies, and give equal attention to the humanitarian situation in all regions of the country. However, the humanitarian crisis requires a holistic and comprehensive approach, going beyond the simple delivery of aid.

Kazakhstan therefore offers its full support to Mr. Lowcock and Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura. We highly esteem the contributions of the Special Envoy in attempting to get the constitutional committee established and in promoting dialogue between the different formats on Syria.

Kazakhstan warmly welcomes the recent Istanbul summit attended by the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Turkey. As the first summit on Syria to bring together the representatives of the small group and the Astana process, it demonstrated that we may be close to finding a solution to the crisis. As we noted earlier, Kazakhstan strongly supports the dialogue of the Astana format with other forums. This dialogue augurs well for new approaches to addressing both political and humanitarian issues. In this context, we encourage the outcomes of the summit, including those relating to the soon-to-be-created the Syrian constitutional committee. Moreover, given that the situation in Syria is gradually stabilizing, we hope that humanitarian assistance will reach the population in need through direct routes as quickly as possible.

Mr. Ipo (Côte d'Ivoire) (*spoke in French*): My delegation welcomes today's briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria. We thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for his excellent briefing.

Côte d'Ivoire welcomes the signing on 17 September by the Russian Federation and Turkey of the agreement establishing a demilitarized zone in the governorate of Idlib. This agreement prevented the much feared confrontation between the warring parties, thus avoiding the unprecedented humanitarian disaster that would have resulted. Côte d'Ivoire therefore urges all parties to resolutely support the implementation of the provisions of this agreement, in particular those relating to the withdrawal of heavy weapons and armed combatants from the demilitarized zone.

Indeed, the situation in Syria remains fragile, particularly in the governorate of Idlib, where the risk of renewed fighting cannot be ruled out. My country therefore calls on the actors in the Syrian crisis to exercise restraint and take the necessary measures to ensure safe, unhindered and sustainable access for humanitarian assistance to Syrian populations in need, both in Idlib and throughout the country. Côte d'Ivoire reminds the protagonists of the conflict in Syria of their responsibilities under international humanitarian law and the relevant provisions of resolution 2417 (2018). It also welcomes the continued multifaceted assistance of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes to populations living in areas affected by armed clashes.

My country would like to welcome the continuation of cross-border humanitarian assistance. It also calls for a renewal of the modalities set out in resolution

2165 (2014) and subsequent resolutions, so as to provide cross-border assistance, which is essential in view of the risks of a deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Idlib province.

My delegation remains convinced that a lasting solution to the Syrian crisis can only be found through a political process based on an inclusive dialogue among all stakeholders. In this regard, it welcomes the initiatives taken in the context of the Geneva and Astana processes and the recent quadripartite summit in Istanbul, all aimed at a cessation of hostilities and the return of lasting peace and stability in Syria. My country believes that there can be no lasting peace in Syria without accountability for the serious human rights violations in that country. It therefore urges all parties, including the States, civil society and United Nations agencies, to cooperate fully with the international, impartial and independent investigative assistance mechanism to ensure that armed persons or groups responsible for war crimes are held accountable before the competent international courts.

In conclusion, Côte d'Ivoire wishes to reiterate that a lasting solution to the current crisis in Syria requires an inclusive political process as well as the implementation of the conclusions of the Geneva communiqué of 30 June 2012 and the provisions of the Sochi Declaration of 30 January 2018.

Mr. Wu Haitao (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): China expresses its deep condolences for the victims on board Indonesia's Lion Air and expresses its sympathy to their families.

China thanks Under-Secretary-General Lowcock for his briefing. We have taken note of the Secretary-General's recent report on humanitarian relief efforts in Syria (S/2018/947).

At present, the overall situation in Syria remains calm. The memorandum of understanding between Russia and Turkey on stabilizing the de-escalation zone in Idlib is being implemented. The situation in Idlib has been eased, the conflicts across the entire territory of Syria are on the decline, and a more favourable environment for improving the humanitarian situation in Syria has therefore been created. At the same time, years of conflict have resulted in massive humanitarian demand in the country, featuring a large population in need of assistance and severely damaged infrastructure.

The international community should continue to assist the Syrian people in cash and in kind, with the current focus on preparation for winter. We have noticed the gradual reopening of Nasib and other major crossing points along the Syrian-Jordanian border. Major road, power grid, water supply and other infrastructure are gradually being restored, thus creating a more favourable environment for the reconstruction of the country and the return of refugees. Only by steadily advancing the reconstruction efforts can expectations of the Syrian people be met and normal life be resumed. The international community should actively support the reconstruction efforts of the Government and the people of Syria, including enhanced efforts aimed at clearing explosive remnants of war.

All parties in Syria should bear in mind the future of the country and the well-being of its people, follow the relevant Council resolutions, maintain the ceasefire, halt all hostilities, settle differences through dialogue and consultations and expeditiously improve the humanitarian situation. The United Nations and the international community should strengthen communication with the Syrian Government and provide assistance to all areas in need in Syria. At the same time, humanitarian relief efforts in Syria should be guided by the principles of neutrality, impartiality and non-politicization and be based on respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity.

Terrorist groups continue to threaten Syria's security and hinder humanitarian-relief efforts. The international community should be firm in combating all terrorist organizations listed by the Council, consolidate the results of counter-terrorism efforts and restore stability in Syria.

China has been making tireless efforts to alleviate the humanitarian situation in Syria. Last July, President Xi Jinping announced new initiatives at the eighth ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum to provide humanitarian assistance to Syria and its affected neighbours, which we will actively implement. Not long ago, China delivered power equipment, such as cables and transformers, to Syria, which we believe will play a positive role in improving Syria's power infrastructure and ensuring people's basic livelihoods. China remains committed to helping the Syrian people.

Ms. Guadey (Ethiopia): Like others, I would like to start by expressing our sincere condolences to the people and the Government of Indonesia following the plane crash.

We would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Mark Lowcock for his briefing. We express our appreciation to the United Nations and its humanitarian partners for their continued work to provide humanitarian assistance in Syria.

As the Secretary-General stated in his report (S/2018/947), we are witnessing a reduced level of hostilities in a number of areas in Syria. Due to the agreement reached between Russia and Turkey, military activities have also dramatically decreased in Idlib. In that regard, we appreciate the continued efforts of Russia and Turkey and stress the importance of the sustained implementation of the de-militarization agreement, which averted a possible humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib.

Despite those encouraging developments, we also note with concern that the humanitarian needs in Syria remain acute. There are some areas, such as Rukban camp, where humanitarian conditions are grave. In addition, humanitarian access remains a challenge in providing aid to hard-to-reach areas, as well as to places that have seen a change of control. Civilians also continue to be affected by the direct or indirect consequences of hostilities.

Amid those conditions, we appreciate that the United Nations and its humanitarian partners have reached out to millions, providing life-saving assistance to those in need through regular programming and cross-border assistance, which, according to the report of the Secretary-General, remains an indispensable part of the humanitarian response. As inter-agency convoys have not been deployed since August, we encourage the United Nations to continue its communication and engagement with Syrian authorities to ensure that humanitarian access to priority areas that change control is ensured. Furthermore, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners still require safe, rapid, unhindered and sustained humanitarian access to effectively respond to the continued needs of millions of Syrians. The protection of civilians and civilian facilities also remains imperative.

Finally, as we discussed last week (see S/PV.8383), finding a comprehensive and inclusive political solution, based on resolution 2254 (2015), is the best way to end the suffering of the Syrian people — hence, our continued support to Special Envoy De Mistura as he makes every possible effort to revitalize the political process, starting with the establishment of the constitutional committee in his remaining few but critical weeks. In that regard, we welcome the outcome of the Quartet summit held in Istanbul on Saturday, which we believe could contribute to the relaunching of the political process.

Mr. Meza-Cuadra (Peru) (*spoke in Spanish*): I, too, would like to begin by extending condolences to the Government and the people of Indonesia following the tragic plane crash.

We welcome today's meeting and thank Mr. Lowcock for his detailed briefing.

We would like to underscore the considerable reduction in the level of violence in Idlib and surrounding areas following the agreement reached in September between Turkey and the Russian Federation. At the same time, we are concerned about the fact that millions of civilians in Idlib and other areas in Syria remain extremely vulnerable. As mentioned, the humanitarian situation in Idlib is far from encouraging. The detonation of improvised explosive devices and other reprehensible acts of violence attributed primarily to Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham continue to claim lives and injure civilians. Malnutrition and the spread of disease have increased. We believe that it is necessary to prevent further deterioration and reverse the humanitarian situation in Idlib and the rest of Syria. The agreement brokered by Turkey and Russia must be taken advantage of to more effectively and sustainably protect civilians, in line with international humanitarian law and international human rights law.

We note that the situation in Rukban also requires special attention. The 45,000 people who remain in the camp endure uncertain living conditions, do not receive medical care and find it very difficult to source water and food. We would therefore like to underscore the importance of providing access to the area for United Nations and other humanitarian workers and highlight the need to support their action in the coming months. In addition, we welcome the fact that the return to Raqqa is now possible and underscore the need for the international community to continue working to reduce the high risk posed by the presence of many improvised explosive devices. We stress that the vulnerability of millions of internally displaced persons requires,

among other urgent measures, the immediate, safe and unhindered access of humanitarian assistance, in particular cross-border assistance. It is also important to ensure the right of refugees and internally displaced persons to voluntarily return to their homes and businesses, in a safe and dignified manner, according to internationally agreed guidelines.

We would like to conclude by praising the tireless and courageous efforts of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and its staff to provide an effective humanitarian response in Syria, as well as by imploring all parties concerned to commit to finding a political solution to the conflict, starting with the establishment of a constitutional committee by the end of the year.

Mr. Van Oosterom (Netherlands): First of all, let me join others in offering condolences to the families of the victims of the terrible plane crash in Indonesia.

Let me thank Mr. Mark Lowcock for his sobering briefing. Let me also thank the humanitarian workers in Syria for their tireless efforts to improve the lives of those in need. Those colleagues from the United Nations, as well as from international and local non-governmental organizations, including the White Helmets, deserve our deep respect, gratitude and support.

I will focus on three points: first, the need for humanitarian and cross-border access; secondly, the need for sustained de-escalation in Idlib and respect for international humanitarian law; and, thirdly, the need for a United Nations-led political process.

First, with regard to access, humanitarian needs remain high throughout the country, after nearly eight years of continuous warfare. We are deeply concerned about the lack of access within Syria, even to areas now in the hands of the Syrian regime. The regime does not allow inter-agency convoys to reach those most in need. It has not done so since 16 August. Several areas to which access is being denied were previously in the hands of the Syrian opposition. It is unacceptable that civilians continue to be collectively punished by the regime for living in former opposition-held areas. The Syrian Government should not be allowed to continue interfering in the delivery of life-saving aid. We cannot accept a situation where so-called hard-to-reach areas are only hard to reach because of artificial barriers imposed by the Syrian regime. It has a responsibility towards all its citizens. The Syrian regime must guarantee access for objective needs assessments and for distribution aid to those most in need. These are crucial preconditions for the delivery of principled humanitarian aid. We need access for the delivery of aid, for the independent assessment of needs and for monitoring the situation in the light of the protection thresholds of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The humanitarian needs in Idlib are among the most serious in the country. Three million civilians remain trapped between the Syrian Army and the Turkish border. On the basis of the information that Mr. Lowcock has just provided, it is clear that cross-border assistance is currently an indispensable lifeline for civilians in Idlib. In September, more than 600,000 people received food aid from Turkey through that mechanism. The message from the Council should be clear that it is a matter of life and death to continue this humanitarian channel until the end of the year. There is no alternative to cross-border aid if we want civilians in Idlib to survive.

We are concerned about Mr. Lowcock's report that the convoy has not yet reached Rukban. The situation of the 45,000 people in that camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border is desperate and a long-term solution for them is long overdue. We call on the parties involved to work to come up with solutions, taking the dignity of those trapped there into account.

My second point concerns the need for sustained de-escalation in Idlib and respect for international humanitarian law. As others have done, we welcome the drop in violence in and around Idlib since the conclusion of the memorandum of understanding between Turkey and Russia. It has reduced the immediate risk of a humanitarian catastrophe and brought the people of Idlib a moment of respite. It is still essential to preventing an all-out military offensive in Idlib. We call on all the parties to translate the reduced violence in Idlib into a sustainable ceasefire that can lead to a negotiated solution for Idlib.

Respect for international humanitarian law is an obligation for all parties to the conflict in Syria. That includes protecting civilians and facilitating principled humanitarian action. Civilians need to be able to leave Idlib freely if they wish to do so of their own free will. In addition, the existing de-confliction measures should bring an end to the inhumane attacks on hospitals that we have witnessed throughout the war in Syria. However, de-confliction should not turn

into a thinly veiled mechanism for granting approval for humanitarians and doctors to operate. In our view, humanitarians and doctors must always be able to do their work. The responsibility for any attack now lies fully with the Syrian regime and its allies supporting them from the air. Those responsible will be held to account.

My third point has to do with support for a United Nations-led political process. On Friday, when the Council discussed the constitutional committee (S/PV.8383), I stressed that the committee is not a goal in itself but rather part of the broader United Nations-led political process based on the Geneva communiqué (S/2012/522, annex) and resolution 2254 (2015). Peace and stability in Syria can be found only through a political solution that is inclusive of all Syrians. The Kingdom of the Netherlands therefore strongly disagrees with premature calls for reconstruction aid and the return of refugees. There will be no reconstruction aid for Syria from the European Union until a comprehensive, irreversible, credible and inclusive political transition is firmly under way. It should be negotiated by the Syrian parties to the conflict on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva communiqué. We see the role of the United Nations, and especially that of Staffan de Mistura and his successor, as crucial in this context. I would once again like to draw the Council's attention to a statement by eminent jurists setting out clear standards for reconstruction aid in Syria. They gave us their legal opinion on 24 September that

> "without adherence to these standards, the provision of reconstruction assistance can facilitate past, continuous or new violations of international law, which would in turn give rise to complicity or shared international responsibility".

I should also underline that any transition requires accountability for acts committed during the conflic, which is also specified in the Geneva communiqué. In order to achieve sustainable peace, those suspected of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria must be held to account. If the Council continues to be blocked by a veto in referring the matter to the International Criminal Court, we will continue our accountability efforts elsewhere.

At the moment Syria is not ready for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees, which can be facilitated only when the protection thresholds are in place, and UNHCR's involvement is crucial to monitoring the protection of Syrian civilians.

In conclusion, we fully support the five asks that Mr. Lowcock presented just now. We need to see rapid and meaningful improvements for humanitarian access throughout Syria. Cross-border aid remains essential to reaching civilians in Idlib, many of whom are internally displaced and depend on humanitarian aid for survival. We emphasize the points made by our French colleague on the need for a sustainable political solution. Meanwhile, let us make sure that the United Nations can alleviate the needs of the civilians in Syria who have suffered so terribly for so long already.

Mr. Orrenius Skau (Sweden): I too would like to express our deepest condolences to the Government and the people of Indonesia for the plane crash this morning.

The representative of Kuwait has already spoken on behalf of Sweden as co-penholder, but after listening to this morning's statements, I want to take the floor just to highlight a few issues on which I hear a broad convergence of positions. Fortunately, those areas also seem to overlap with the asks put forward this morning by the Under-Secretary-General.

First, I want to touch on respect for humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law, including access to Rukban and other hard-to-reach areas, as well as protection, including in Deir ez-Zor and, more generally of hospitals and other health-care facilities and schools. That also relates to the importance of independent needs assessments and monitoring for principled humanitarian action, as the Under-Secretary-General discussed this morning. The second point I want to highlight is the implementation of the Russian-Turkish agreement on the ceasefire in Idlib in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe there. Thirdly, in the light of the above we need to renew the modalities in resolution 2165 (2014) on humanitarian access, including for ensuring its continued delivery to more than 3 million civilians in Idlib and across northern Syria.

Finally, it seems that we all agree that the humanitarian situation can be alleviated only if we make progress on the political track, through a political solution based on resolution 2254 (2015). We hope that Council members can come together around these points in a serious effort to alleviate the enormous human suffering in Syria.

Mr. Safronkov (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): First of all, of course, we want to express our sincere condolences to the Governments and the peoples of the United States and Indonesia in the wake of their recent tragedies.

We thank Mr. Lowcock for his comprehensive briefing. We very much appreciate the work of United Nations humanitarian agencies, particularly when it is conducted impartially in strict observance of the United Nations principles for the provision of humanitarian assistance.

Against a backdrop of the successful liberation of large parts of Syria from terrorists, efforts are continuing to restore normal life and return refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes. We must unite to collectively and actively assist in those processes and not to obstruct them on politicized pretexts or with dozens of frankly incomprehensible conditions. The Russian initiative to convene an international conference on Syrian refugees was designed to help unite those efforts. The authorities in Damascus have given security guarantees to those who want to return home and are working on a legal framework that would facilitate their rapid reintegration.

The flow of Syrians returning from Lebanon is increasing. We can see the effect that the opening of the Nasib crossing has had on the Syrian-Jordanian border. People on both sides of the border have been waiting impatiently for several years for this transportation artery, which supports regional, trade and human links, to start functioning again. Such steps deserve every encouragement for the contribution they make to achieving a principle as fundamental to the stabilization of the situation in the Middle East as the establishment of good-neighbourliness.

The implementation of the memorandum of understanding on stabilizing the situation in the de-escalation zone in Idlib based on the high-level Russian-Turkish agreement is proceeding successfully. Our Turkish partners are doing everything they can to get the armed groups and their heavy weapons out of the demilitarized zone. However, the militias based there continue to violate the terms of the agreement by firing on nearby villages, and there are new reports of suspicious movements of Al-Nusra Front members and White Helmets with toxic substances. We should point out that the de-escalation agreements were temporary from the start, and no one has taken the job of eliminating the terrorist presence in Syria off the agenda. If the provocations by radical elements continue, Russia reserves the right to support effective action by the Syrian Government to eliminate terrorist strongholds.

We share the Secretary-General's concern about the disastrous humanitarian situation in Rukban. And in general, the humanitarian situation in Syria would improve if the coalition stopped violating the Syrian Arab Republic's sovereignty through its illegal presence, by which I particularly have in mind the well-known Al-Tanf military base in the south of the country and the coalition presence east of the Euphrates. The economic activity in those illegally occupied areas, without coordinating with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, also raises numerous questions generally.

Leaders from Russia, Turkey, Germany and France met in Istanbul on 27 October and adopted a joint statement, and we are grateful to the President of Turkey for that important unifying initiative. The summit participants expressed a general disposition to cooperate with a view to further normalizing the situation in Syria, for which the conditions have been established in the framework of the Astana format through the efforts of Russia, Turkey and Iran. A commitment was expressed to a political settlement under the auspices of the United Nations in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015) and with full respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. Incidentally, the question of collaboration between the Astana process and the so-called small group was also discussed at the Istanbul summit.

The importance of getting the work of a constitutional committee started based the decision of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi was acknowledged, and we hope that it will be able to start before the end of this year, assuming that the conditions are conducive. The professionals, however, realize that it must be recognized as legitimate by all parties if it is to be efficient and effective. It is important that everyone understands that it is the people of Syria who are responsible for its fate, and it is they who must determine every aspect related to their State's structure during the course of the dialogue. After so many years of war, the country will have to undergo a process of national reconciliation, one way or another. And Syria has always been distinguished by a high level of national reconciliation. The United Nations, the international community and Syria's friends can help, but imposing ready-made solutions, ultimatums

or deadlines on the Syrians is wrong and futile. And in any case, the empirical evidence shows that trying to impose solutions in any regional crisis does not work.

In answer to the numerous questions that have been directed to us, I would like to inform the members of the Council that the joint statement by the leaders who participated in the quadrilateral summit in Istanbul will be circulated as an official Security Council document in the next few minutes, and I can assure the Council that is contains exhaustive answers. I thank the Council members who supported the joint statement and thereby affirmed their willingness to work constructively in the quest for a political settlement of the conflict in Syria.

I would like to bring to the attention of my colleagues who continue to use terms such as "the Syrian regime" the fact that such usage is contrary to all the relevant Security Council resolutions, which speak only of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic. A respectful approach is needed, and it would also help to advance the political process.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I will now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of Bolivia.

We would like to thank Mr. Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his briefing.

My delegation reiterates its position that it will be possible to reduce the violence throughout the Syrian territory within the framework of resolution 2401 (2018). In that context, we want to emphasize the local agreements and initiatives promoted by the Astana guarantors, as well as the agreement between Russia and Turkey that has enabled the establishment of a demilitarized zone within Idlib province, helping to reduce violence, evacuate those in need and facilitate access for humanitarian assistance. We encourage the agreements to continue with the aim of enabling people to return to normal life and to their places of origin. We want to remind all concerned that their return must be voluntary and unhindered, ensuring people's full dignity and safe conditions. In that regard, we urge that the clearing of unexploded ordnance, explosive remnants of war and landmines in residential areas continue.

We reiterate that there can be no military solution to the conflict in Syria. On the contrary, we emphasize that the parties must respect international law and especially international humanitarian law, in regard to which we want to highlight the agreements reached at the meeting held on 27 October between the top-level authorities of Turkey, France, Russia and Germany. The meeting should help to reinforce the dialogue ensuring the ceasefire in Idlib province, in order to protect the lives of millions of civilians and prevent violence against civil infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. We urge the forthcoming high-level meetings to be held in the next few weeks to strengthen those agreements and enable lives to be saved and the humanitarian situation to be improved. In that regard, we consider that any effort made or action taken in the framework of resolution 2401 (2018) that provides for combating armed groups or groups designated as terrorist by the Security Council should also take into account the protection of civilians within the framework of international law. We call on the Council's permanent members who have influence on the ground to exercise it in that regard so that the fight against these terrorists and armed groups does not involve the loss of more innocent lives.

Lastly, we want to emphasize that the only way out of this conflict is to find a sustainable, peaceful solution through an inclusive, Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people in full respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity, within a framework of resolution 2254 (2015) and the Geneva process, under the auspices of the United Nations, as agreed in the Sochi declaration, for which it is vital to continue the efforts aimed at forming a credible, balanced and representative constitutional committee.

I now resume my functions as President of the Security Council.

I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would first like to join my colleagues in expressing our condolences to the Government and the people of Indonesia in the wake of the civilian plane crash.

It is really astonishing that some Western delegations of permanent members of the Security Council deliberately insist on mixing humanitarian and political issues and continue to obstruct honest, transparent and non-politicized humanitarian efforts. Those delegations brag publicly that there will be no

humanitarian action in Syria without a response to their countries' interventionist political agendas. In fact, we have heard today those same delegations set a number of political preconditions that try to strip humanitarian action of its meaning and politically invest in the suffering of the Syrian people.

I recall that today's meeting coincides with an attack committed by the so-called coalition once again against the Hajin region, in eastern Deir ez-Zor, using white phosphorus, which is prohibited worldwide. That attack caused the death of an entire family — a mother, a father and their children. The Council's meeting held on 24 October (see S/PV.8383) coincided with a criminal terrorist attack carried out by terrorist groups in Idlib against Aleppo, which launched 40 missiles that killed dozens of civilians and injured dozens more. The Council's meeting held on 17 October (see S/PV.8373) coincided with an attack by coalition aircraft on Al-Soussa and Albubadran, in Deir ez-Zor, also killing dozens of civilians. All of that is not seen by the Western States that have talked about humanitarian needs in my country or by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations humanitarian agency.

Allow me to congratulate you, Mr. President, and through you your friendly country, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, for wisely conducting the work of the Security Council during the month of October. Your presidency has carried out the task entrusted to it by genuinely seeking to maintain international peace and security while respecting the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations. Many Member States of the Organization are therefore quite proud of that Bolivian high performance.

During the various meetings held recently between Syrian officials and the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. Mark Lowcock, the need to coordinate joint actions between the two parties for a better understanding and to remove obstacles and develop the role of the United Nations in the humanitarian realm in accordance with General Assembly resolution 46/182, which governs OCHA, was underscored — in spite of the difficulties caused by a decrease in financing the United Nations humanitarian action in Syria, which Mr. Lowcock mentioned today, and due to unilateral coercive economic measures undertaken by the United States and the States members of the European Union and others against the Syrian people. They claim that there are 10 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance, while those States impose unilateral coercive economic measures against 23 million Syrians.

The Syrian Government is convinced of the importance of the role that Member States attach to the United Nations. Damascus continues to count on that role to help Syrians who have suffered from the terrorist war imposed against my country, Syria, a role that preserves the credibility and effectiveness of the Organization and respects the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic. All 28 of the Council's political and humanitarian resolutions reaffirm the need to safeguard the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and its people. Such a neutral, independent and non-politicized role that does not yield to blackmailing by certain States is of course based on the Charter and United Nations resolutions.

We listened carefully to the briefing by Mr. Lowcock, and we read with interest the report under consideration (S/2018/947). Allow me to make some comments that will no doubt respond to the questions from some colleagues.

First, there is a crucial need to carry out a transparent, objective and professional dialogue to modify the reporting mechanism concerning the humanitarian situation in Syria so that the goal of the reports can truly be to provide assistance to the Syrians in need of it. Continuing to submit these reports on a monthly basis is a waste of time, money and human resources. We stress that they should be replaced by quarterly reports, because much of the information in the current monthly reports is outdated. For example, in the report before us we are told of what took place a month or two ago, whereas we should really be looking at what is taking place in the current month.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for a transparent, objective and professional discussion on the content of the reports so that they are not used by some to exert political pressure and blackmail. It is unreasonable when everyone has understood that a terrible terrorist war has been taking place in Syria for the past seven years, and after the confessions made by senior officials of certain States that their Governments financed and sponsored terrorism — not to mention those who spoke before the Congress and the Senate, or the previous Chief of Staff and the previous Minister of Defence — and yet the authors of the reports continue

to draft them in a negative, politicized way against the Syrian Arab Republic and its institutions, especially given that everyone knows by now that the terrorist groups continue to use civilians as human shields and hospitals and schools as military bases from which to launch their terrorist operations, and that the source of lies targeting the Syrian Government are the terrorist groups and their supporters.

That is all the more so given that the reports include many errors and their authors deviate from their mandated task, while also deliberately ignoring the observations and comments provided to the Secretariat by the Syrian Arab Republic. In fact, we have submitted 56 formal responses to OCHA's reports, including clear answers to all of the questions, but those comments were never reflected in subsequent reports. We have been trying to establish cooperative links with OCHA for years, and we provide OCHA with all the necessary information. Nevertheless, our comments do not arouse the interest of OCHA officials. The remarks from witnesses and White Helmets — and yellow helmets and red helmets — are taken by them, but not the information provided by the Syrian Government.

Thirdly, it is surprising that the report claims that the Syrian Government did not authorize the humanitarian convoy plan for September and October. What he heard today from Mr. Lowcock confirmed that. But the truth is that my country's Government asked the United Nations to include the liberated areas in the plan, which were already included in the assistance plan for besieged and hard-to-reach areas. We have requested that those areas be included in the periodic programme plan for aid delivery. However, the United Nations has not included those liberated areas in the aid plan. Why? I do not know. Mr. Lowcock has the answer.

Fourthly, with regard to the aid delivery to the Rukban camp, which, according to my geographic information, is a camp in Syria, because certain delegations have spoken as though it were a camp in Somalia or the Maldives, I underscore that the Syrian Government has given its approval to United Nations agencies to send a humanitarian assistance convoy to the camp. That would be done in cooperation with the Syrian Red Crescent and the International Committee of the Red Cross, directly from the Syrian Arab Republic. However, having reached the 55-kilometre mark on 26 October, the United Nations convoy returned swiftly to Damascus due to the deterioration of the security situation and reports of an imminent Da'esh attack that was going to be carried out against the convoy from the American-controlled zone, in spite of the assurances provided by the United States to the United Nations on the safety of the convoy. That is clear evidence that the United States is basically impeding the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the Rukban camp and is the main cause of the suffering of its civilian inhabitants. We recall that Da'esh terrorists moved some time ago from the Rukban area, which is under the control of American troops, and towards Al-Suwayda, attacking it and killing 300 civilians at dawn. Those terrorists then went back from Al-Suwayda to Al-Tanf, in the area of Rukban — that is apparently not in Somalia.

Fifthly, my country regrets that the authors of the report promote cross-border assistance in conformity with the directives of certain Western States, even though it has proven to be ineffective and not guaranteed to reach its intended civilians. That assistance is indirectly helping terrorists who seize it and use it for the continuation of their terrorist activities in Syria. For months, the Government of my country has been sending inquiries about the feasibility of that assistance, even if it is monitored by the so-called third party. We are still yet to receive answers in that regard.

Thanks to the safer and more stable situation on the ground due to the victory over terrorism and the Government's continuous rehabilitation of the areas that were destroyed by terrorists and a subsequent return to normal life, the conditions are now in place for the voluntary return of Syrian refugees who had left their homeland due to terrorism and unilateral coercive economic measures that deprived them of their livelihoods. In fact, we are seeing the return of thousands of Syrian refugees from abroad to Syria, in spite of the attempts of certain Western States to prevent them from doing so by intimidating them with flimsy pretexts and politicizing an exclusively humanitarian issue. Those States use this issue to implement their political agenda by linking the return of refugees to the political process. That is confirmed by what we have heard today from the delegations of certain Western States.

In conclusion, as we write the final chapter in the Syrian crisis, Syrians — those who have remained in the country and those who were forced to flee the country due to terrorism — are determined to work together to rid their country of the remnants of the terrorist war and rebuild it with their own hands, capabilities and expertise.

Pertaining to what certain delegations said about the situation in the city of Idlib, I would like to remind everyone in the Council that Idlib is a Syrian city. No one has greater concern than the Syrian Government for that city and its inhabitants, who have been used as human shields by terrorist groups.

My country reaffirms its commitment to the Sochi agreement of 17 September and welcomes any initiative to stop the bloodshed of Syrians. We welcome any initiative to bring safety and security to all of the Syrian territories that have been struck by terrorism. My Government also underscores that it will continue to combat terrorism until we liberate the last inch of Syrian territory from the clutches of terrorists and terrorism and from any foreign military force illegitimately present on Syrian soil.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): The representative of the United Kingdom has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I want to repeat something that I have said before in the Chamber. Criticizing the United Nations for doing its job should not be the task of anyone speaking in the Chamber. I know that we need to have free speech and I know that we need to be frank. But the United Nations, including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, has done an outstanding job in Syria.

The meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.